

# Framing African American Students' Success and Failure in Urban Settings

## A Typology for Change

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Grounded in critical race theory, this article seeks to frame the ideological positions of success and failure for African American students in urban school settings. First, we revisit national data and research literature that illustrate the ongoing urban Black–White achievement gap. Second, the Matrix of Achievement Paradigms is shared in an attempt to advance the conversation on African American students' achievement. It provides a serviceable organizational tool for framing African American students' success and failure. Finally, we bridge rhetoric with practical ideas for stakeholders by providing recommendations for closing the achievement gap in urban settings.

**Keywords:** *academic achievement; urban education; African Americans; Black education*

Serious research attention has been given to the achievement gap between African American and White students in a variety of educational settings (Landsman & Lewis, 2006; Lewis, Hancock, James, & Larke, in press; Lewis & Moore, 2004; Moore, 2003; Obiakor & Beachum, 2006). The Black–White achievement gap has been well hypothesized, studied, and documented, and yet it continues to be a perennial educational issue. As a result of these scholarly investigations, literature on African American achievement has become exhausted with the reality of high academic failure (Braun, Wang, Jenkins, & Weinbaum, 2006; Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000; Education Trust, 2003; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Although

all of America struggles with educating African American learners, nowhere is the Black–White achievement chasm more pronounced than in urban America (Anyon, 1997). Much of the theorizing for remedying on the Black–White achievement gap has focused theoretical assumptions that “blame the victim (African American learner)” for his or her academic plight in society in general (Hernstein & Murray, 1994) and in school in particular (Ellwood, 1901; Milner, 2006). A closer examination of the historical data reveals that African American learners have experienced long-term patterns of scholastic improvement and deterioration (Anderson, 2007; Lee, 2002).

Because African American students are housed predominantly in urban spaces (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2003a, 2003b; National Urban League, 2007), which are historical sites for residential discrimination (Feagin & Feagin, 2003; Kozol, 2005), a review of achievement in urban spaces can serve as a valid representation of America’s separatist Black–White condition. Revered researchers who study achievement gap issues often cite race as a variable in the data (NAEP, NCES) yet avoid or dismiss connections to racism as a factor in African American underachievement. Racism is an elaborate process of social (Feagin, 2006), political (Wilson, 1987), economic (Dyson, 2006), and legal domination (Bell, 1992), which maintains racial categorizations and ideologies as the method for determining which group receives the best and least of society’s resources.

This article is not an exegesis on the permanence of racism in the American society; those arguments, comparable to the Black–White gap, have already been well articulated (e.g., Bell, 1992; Clark, 1965; DuBois, 1953; Dyson, 2006; Feagin, 2006; Haymes, 1995). However, this article accepts Bell’s (1992) racism reality theory and posits that every facet of American life, including education, is affected by an ideology of superiority and the lingering effects of slavery. Bell (1992) asserted that a key indicator for racism is “a pattern of cyclical progress and cyclical regression” (p. 98), as it is a socially constructed part of American culture and is now imbedded, covert, and evolved. Feagin (2006) concurred and further asserted that every institution in America, including education, has been affected by socially constructed determinants of race.

Even our notions of “school success” and “school failure” are themselves socially constructed within society (Varene & McDermott, 1998). Several hypotheses for the causations of the Black–White achievement gap accuse the African American family’s culture or deficient family and community practices. These theories have muffled the voices of a few scholars who still insist that racism is an overlooked and systemic variable whose lingering consequences are manifested in the achievement outcomes for today’s African

American learners (Jencks, 1992; Kozol, 2005; Skrla & Scheurich, 2004). The urban classroom environment is the evident expression of racism and separatism because of its geographically segregated arrangement and because it prevents African American learners from participating in mainstream opportunities (Clark, 1965; Kozol, 2005).

Grounded in critical race theory (Bell, 1992; Feagin, 2006), the authors seek to be a part of a revived national achievement gap dialogue that advances data and theory into concrete ideas. After five decades of research and critique, a new conversation for change must transpire that advances the study of the achievement gap canon. The chief objective of this work is to explore the complex racial paradigms of success and failure for African American students in urban settings and provide stakeholders with recommendations for change. First, we revisit national data that illustrate the ongoing academic disparities of the Black–White dichotomy. These analyses, like those of earlier studies, indicate that African American learners in urban settings achieve well below the national achievement average and their White peers, and such disparate differences are indicative of greater systemic problems. Second, we reassert the philosophical pervasiveness of the racist ideology in society and how it impacts political and practical solutions for students in urban environments. A typology of three interdisciplinary paradigms is offered as an organizational tool for understanding how success and failure are framed for African American learners in urban settings. Finally, only a few studies offer serious solutions for urban schools (Braun et al., 2006; Lewis & Moore, 2004; S. Thompson, Ransdell, & Rousseau, 2005). Therefore, recommendations will be shared for society, school agents, and students' families and communities in urban settings.

## **African American Students' Achievement**

### **Black–White Achievement Gap**

The first step toward framing African American students' achievement in the United States is a clear articulation of the current status of the Black–White Achievement gap in K–12 settings. Although many have contributed to the scholarly debate in the literature about this topic, it is important to note the recent work of Anderson (2007), who details the achievement patterns of African Americans from the 1700s to the present. More specifically, Anderson investigates how generations of African American learners have been able to close the gaps in literacy, elementary school attendance, and high school completion yet have been unable to close test-score gaps. In this context,

“African Americans and educators have much to celebrate, yet currently muting the applause is the looming test score gap” (Anderson, 2007, p. 14). African American achievement is characterized by a national test-score gap and becomes a challenge because each state is given the freedom within the limits of No Child Left Behind (NCLB; implemented in 2001) to design and assess students’ academic knowledge and skills within their respective state. Consequently, researchers and policy makers rely on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), better known as “The Nations’ Report Card,” as a common assessment that allows for comparisons across states pre-and post-NCLB.

Lewis et al. (in press) analyzed the impact of NCLB legislation on the reading and math achievement of African American K-12 students. The researchers concluded, among other things, that the policies enacted under NCLB had no impact on achievement, because 88% (reading) and 87% (math) of the students scored at “basic” and “below basic” levels at Grade 4. Stated differently, given the slow rate of change, during the first 5 years of NCLB, it will take another 45 years for all African American students in the eighth grade to achieve “At Proficient” levels in reading and math (p. 19). This is in comparison to 60% (reading) and 53% (math) of White students at Grade 4 who reached the “At Proficient” category.

Likewise, Braun et al. (2006) conducted an extensive study drawn from 1992-2000 (NAEP) data of 10 states that enrolled more than 40% of the country’s African American students. Their study also focused on the Black–White eighth-grade math achievement gap at the state level, stratifications of schools by the socioeconomic status of students, and individual schools within these strata. Their results suggest that across and within these states, and in every SES strata, the Black–White eighth-grade math achievement gap is “pervasive, profound and persistent” (Braun et al., 2006, p. 2).

To further support this national achievement and disparity claim, an NCES (2000) report concluded that there is a 4-year performance and knowledge gap in mathematics and reading comparing the White and African American students. In fact, this study references results from the NAEP and revealed that by the end of the 12th grade, African American students demonstrated mastery of reading and mathematic concepts similar to that of a White eighth grade student. Most of the discussion on the national Black–White achievement gap has focused on quantifying the achievement gap. This section uses recent national accountability systems to critically review the disparity between racial groups nationally. Although these critiques have been done before, the researchers maintain that this is the first step to performing equity audits; leadership protocols that use accountability data, curricula

reviews, and the history of civil rights in exploring the Black–White achievement gap in American education (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). Although this article stops short of reviewing teacher quality and curricular issues, it is a quasi equity audit in that it reviews national achievement data as a means to begin a conversation on test score gaps as an indicator of inequality.

Skrla et al. (2004) follow Mitchell and Poston (1992) who posit that equity audits are powerful ways to identify, analyze, and evaluate *equality* and suggest that fully unraveling achievement gaps can shed great insight on the status of parity between racial and ethnic groups and offer remedies for change. This article also considers Mitchell and Poston's (1992) claim that achievement data, with a difference of 20 percentage points or more, is indicative of systemic problems between socioeconomic and racial groups. In the urban environment, this achievement gap phenomenon is exemplified.

## **The Urban Achievement Gap**

Although all African American students around the nation battle with underachievement, the urban learner is at an increased risk. First, Talbert-Johnson (2004) and Anyon (1997) noted that many urban students, when compared to suburban or rural students, face the added challenge of overcoming limited access to critical educational resources and knowledge. Thompson et al. (2005) asserted that urban education is further characterized by low student-performance outcomes, student discipline problems, poor student health, and limited access to supplemental learning resources. The national urban mathematics and reading results of fourth- and eighth-grade students suggest that a lack of resources may be one of a number of issues to affect learners, some of which have far-reaching and systemic implications for the test score gap.

### *Mathematics at Grade 4 for African American Students in Urban Settings*

An examination of Table 1 that documents National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data from the *Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA)* (2005) for Mathematics illustrates that for the 11 urban school districts under examination in this study, 6 districts (e.g., Atlanta, Chicago, Cleveland, District of Columbia, Los Angeles, and San Diego) have at least 40% of their African American students in the “Below Basic” category in mathematics at Grade 4. The situation is more troubling when considering

**Table 1**  
**Percentage of African American Students at Each Achievement Level**  
**on NAEP assessments at Grade 4 and Grade 8 Mathematics in**  
**2005 for Selected Urban School Districts**

Urban District	Race	Grade 4				Grade 8			
		Below Basic	At Basic	At Proficient	At Advanced	Below Basic	At Basic	At Proficient	At Advanced
Atlanta	Black	49	42	9	—	72	24	4	—
	White	4	23	50	22	*	*	*	*
Austin	Black	26	56	16	2	48	40	9	3
	White	1	24	58	17	10	29	42	20
Boston	Black	35	51	13	—	55	36	8	1
	White	12	45	38	6	17	30	35	19
Charlotte	Black	26	53	19	1	46	40	12	1
	White	3	27	51	19	10	29	42	19
Chicago	Black	59	35	6	—	72	26	3	—
	White	12	45	38	6	29	39	26	7
Cleveland	Black	48	45	8	—	71	26	3	—
	White	19	56	23	1	46	37	16	2
District of Columbia	Black	59	35	5	—	73	23	3	—
	White	1	21	55	23	23	39	31	7
Houston	Black	33	53	14	1	53	40	7	—
	White	3	24	57	16	15	35	41	9
Los Angeles	Black	58	33	9	—	71	22	6	1
	White	13	38	39	10	32	37	24	7
New York City	Black	37	49	13	1	56	33	9	2
	White	13	41	41	6	23	39	31	7
San Diego	Black	40	46	14	1	60	32	7	1
	White	6	44	41	9	17	41	32	10

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics (2005). Note: Em dashes indicate that there were not enough students to equal 1%, and asterisks mean that the number did not meet NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) sample requirements.

the cumulative percentage of African American fourth-graders who failed to earn “At Proficient” status on the math assessment (*Below* Basic and *At* Basic). Charlotte and Austin experienced the “best of the worst” achievement rates among urban educational learners, with 80% and 82% of African American fourth-graders that scored below the “At Proficient” category. Next, Boston, Houston, New York, and San Diego data illustrate that 86% of African Americans students in each of these cities tested below the “At

Proficient" category in math. In Atlanta and Los Angeles only one (1) out of ten (10) African American students in urban schools attained "At Proficient" attainment in math, whereas 91% of the African American students tested below the "At Proficient" category in these cities. The lowest performing urban educational settings were in Cleveland, Chicago, and the District of Columbia, where 92%, 94%, and 95% of African American fourth-graders did not reach the "At Proficient" category in math, respectively. Overall, approximately 88% of African American fourth-graders in these urban settings failed to earn proficiency in mathematics in 2005. Finally, it is interesting to note that not 1 of these 11 urban educational settings has more than 20% of their African American fourth-grade math students ranked in the "At Proficient" or the "At Advanced" categories combined. This is particularly troubling given that the national average is 30% of students in the United States in the "At Proficient" category in Grade 4 math. In comparison, the national average for White students is 40% in the "At Proficient" category and 12% for African American students; this difference of 28 percentage points is so significant that systemic causes should be considered.

#### *Mathematics at Grade 8 for African American Students in Urban Settings*

Likewise in Table 1, we find that each of the 11 urban educational settings under examination have at least 46% of their African American students in the "Below Basic" category. Unfortunately, 9 of the 11 urban school systems (i.e., Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, District of Columbia, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, and San Diego) range from 53% to 73% of the African American students in the "Below Basic" category. When we examine the total percentage of African American students in the "Below Basic" and "At Basic" categories (which is still below "At Proficient"), we find the following percentages of students testing below "At Proficient" in the 11 urban school systems: (a) Atlanta, 96%; (b) Austin, 88%; (c) Boston, 91%; (d) Charlotte, 86%; (e) Chicago, 97%; (f) Cleveland, 97%; (g) District of Columbia, 96%; (h) Houston, 93%; (i) Los Angeles, 93%; and (j) San Diego, 92%. For the sake of comparison, it is interesting to note that the national average for students in Grade 8 that reached the "At Proficient" status was 23%. Also, the national mathematics average for White students who rated "At Proficient" was 30% in comparison to the dismal 8% proficiency rate for African American students at this grade level. Again, the national mathematics achievement gap for eighth-graders in urban classrooms

is so markedly divergent from the national average that institutional causes, such as racism, must be deliberated.

*Reading at Grade 4 for African American Students in Urban Educational Settings*

The results on the reading assessment for fourth-graders that documents the NAEP data from the *TUDA* (2005) in these same 11 urban educational systems reveals an equally grim record. In Table 2, we found that an average of 60.8% of African American fourth-graders tested at the “Below Basic” category in Reading. Even more disturbing, 5 of the 11 urban school districts report numbers higher than 60% of the African American students in the “Below Basic” category (i.e., Atlanta, Chicago, Cleveland, District of Columbia, and Los Angeles). In the most successful urban school systems in this database, at least half of African American fourth-graders tested at the “Below Basic” category in reading. Overall, reviewing the data in Table 2, at a minimum, 88% of all African American fourth-graders tested below the “At Proficient” standard in these cities. Once again, it is interesting to note that the national average for U.S. students in the “At Proficient” category in Grade 4 Reading was 23%. More specifically, the national reading average for White students was 30% “At Proficient” in this category, whereas only 11% of African American students met the “At Proficient” standard. In a dreaded but expected conclusion, we find urban African American fourth-graders around the country who contend with a disparate achievement gap in reading in comparison to the their White counterparts.

*Reading at Grade 8*

Last, an examination of reading data at Grade 8 reveals similar patterns of performance among African American students in these 11 urban educational settings. In Table 2, we can combine the percentage of African American students in the “Below Basic” and “At Basic” categories to yield the total percentage of African American eighth-graders testing below the “At Proficient” status in reading in each of the following cities: (a) Atlanta, 91%; (b) Austin, 90%; (c) Boston, 86%; (d) Charlotte, 87%; (e) Chicago, 90%; (f) Cleveland, 92%; (g) District of Columbia, 91%; (h) Houston, 89%; (i) Los Angeles, 91%; (j) New York, 90%; and (k) San Diego, 88%. In sum, a staggering 89% of African American eighth-graders are not proficient in reading in the 11 urban schooling systems in the NAEP database. This is especially troubling given that the national average for U.S. students in the “At Proficient” category in Grade 8 reading was 26%. More specifically,



**Table 2**  
**Percentage of African American Students at Each Achievement Level**  
**on NAEP Assessments at Grade 4 and Grade 8 Reading in 2005**  
**for Selected Urban School Districts**

Urban District	Race	Grade 4				Grade 8			
		Below Basic	At Basic	At Proficient	At Advanced	Below Basic	At Basic	At Proficient	At Advanced
Atlanta	Black	67	24	8	1	57	34	9	—
	White	5	21	45	28	*	*	*	*
Austin	Black	57	31	12	1	48	42	9	—
	White	14	32	37	17	14	36	44	7
Boston	Black	55	34	10	1	48	38	13	1
	White	21	40	31	8	19	35	42	4
Charlotte	Black	51	33	13	2	45	42	12	1
	White	14	30	36	19	13	38	43	7
Chicago	Black	69	24	7	1	50	40	10	—
	White	30	31	29	11	19	40	38	3
Cleveland	Black	68	25	7	1	56	36	8	—
	White	46	37	15	2	34	46	18	2
District of Columbia	Black	71	21	7	1	58	33	8	—
	White	8	22	41	29	6	20	50	24
Houston	Black	51	33	13	3	47	42	11	—
	White	12	27	39	22	11	36	46	7
Los Angeles	Black	72	19	7	2	60	31	8	—
	White	29	28	29	14	31	38	26	5
New York City	Black	51	33	14	2	51	39	10	—
	White	25	38	27	9	20	42	34	4
San Diego	Black	57	29	13	1	47	41	11	—
	White	31	30	28	11	18	38	39	5

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics (2005). Note: Em dashes indicate that there were not enough students to equal 1%, and asterisks mean that the number did not meet NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) sample requirements.

the national average for White students was 34% in the “At Proficient” category in comparison to an 11% “At Proficiency” rate for African American students.

Clearly, the national and urban achievement NCES, NAEP, and TUDA data shared for African American fourth- and eighth-graders in mathematics and reading are deplorable. Only 12% and 8% of urban African American fourth- and eighth-graders, respectively, are “At Proficient” in math compared

to the national average of 30%. Alarming still, 11% (national average: 23%) of African American fourth-graders and 11% (national average: 26%) of African American eighth-graders are “At Proficient” in reading. Mitchell and Poston (1992) advised us that these types of major differences in achievement are indicative of systemic disparity in education, which is reflective of systemic inequality in American society (Feagin, 2006).

During three centuries of education, African American learners have experienced gains and losses in educational attainment (Anderson, 2007). Bell (1992) reminded us not to get too excited about these rises in African American progress, because he noted that they will produce no more than temporary “peaks of progress,” short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways to maintain White dominance (p. 12). And when we happen on the valleys, reflected in the achievement of African American students, we should be reminded of the permanence and systemic nature of racism (Feagin, 2006), manifested in society and all its institutions—including the institution of education. Several educational paradigms demonstrate that racial oppression, taking cues from the past, is part of a silent and ubiquitous undercurrent in urban settings affecting African American learners.

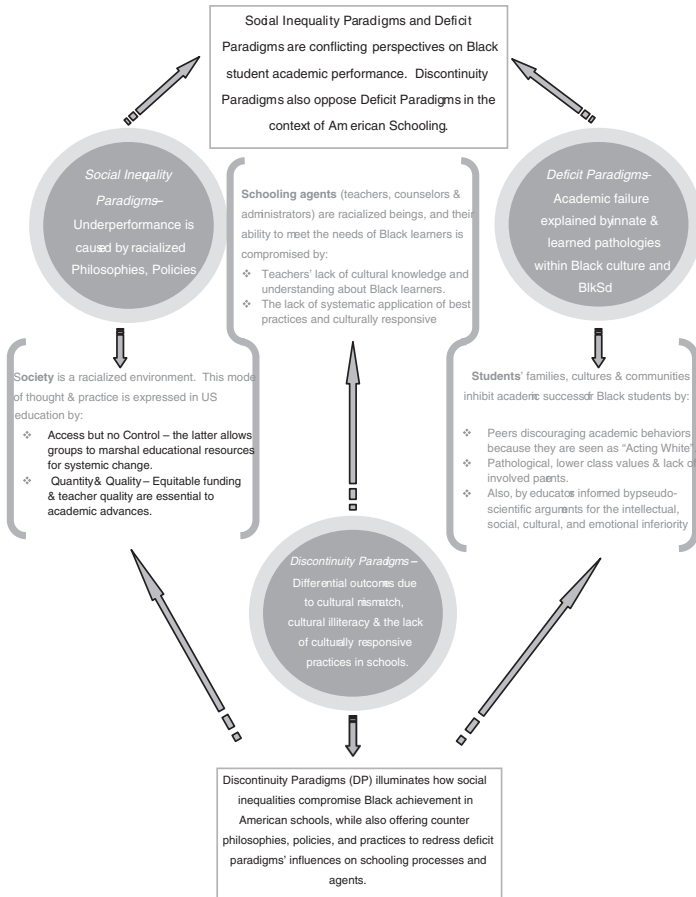
### **Framing African American Students’ Success and Failure: A Typology for Change**

Any serious attempt to address the achievement gap between African American and White students must be approached from multiple perspectives and theoretical positions. There is no “silver bullet” that can explain the existence and persistence of the Black–White achievement gap. Often reflective archetypes can help theorists and researchers make sense of phenomena such as the achievement gap. As a result, we put forth a refined model, matrix of achievement paradigms (MAP), for African American student performance that encompasses three interrelated and competing paradigms: (a) social–structural, (b) deficit, and (c) discontinuity paradigms.

#### **The Social–Structural Inequality Paradigm**

The first iteration within the MAP is the social–structural inequality paradigm, which argues that schools are born from, maintained by, and reproduced from racist philosophies, policies, and practices in education (Aguirre & Turner, 2004; Feagin & Feagin, 2003; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). The result is an educational system that lacks resource equity, thus perpetuating the

**Figure 1**  
**Matrix of Achievement Paradigms (MAP) for**  
**African American Students**



achievement gap and other race- and class-based social inequalities in American society (Anyon, 1980; Kozol, 1991, 2005).

Social-structural inequality scholars also hold agents (teachers, administrators, and educational institutions) of the American schooling system responsible for the Black-White achievement gap. In addition, they also

view the prevalence of deficit models in education and an inability by schools to mend cultural disconnects as a byproduct of larger social, historical, economic, and political processes (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Feagin (2006) and Lewis et al. (in press) noted that the education system is functioning in harmony with all other systems and institutions (i.e., economic, legal, family, religious, media, and government) in American society, benefiting students who are members of privileged social groups at the expense of less privileged students (p. 22). Supportively, Rushing (2001) noted that the American schooling system "is not a neutral institution, but one that functions in the context of political, cultural and social inequalities and plays a role in maintaining and legitimating those inequalities" (p. 32). In this view, the persistent lack of true educational equity is evidence of a larger social process that can't be explained by blaming students or schools; rather, all aspects of American society (institutions, laws, policies, practices, norms, and values) play a role in creating and maintaining educational inequities.

We propose that the social-structural inequities in education can be discussed with regard to access versus control and quantity versus quality of educational resources. For instance, Anderson (2007) noted that African Americans gained access to education following the elimination of slavery and greater access via civil rights legislation. Although African Americans undoubtedly have educational access, they still lack educational control or the ability to reasonably shape educational policy, practices, and philosophies for the benefit of African American learners. Knaus (2007) provided a relevant commentary on this phenomenon by concluding that NCLB is eroding the integrity of curriculum, teacher quality, and student achievement for African Americans. He further notes that the ill-conceived policies of NCLB contributes to the re-segregation of public education, a decreasing focus on culturally responsive pedagogy in state policies, and the proliferation of interventions designed without regard for the body of research on African American student achievement. Paradoxically, the very legislation that mandates high standards and academic achievement for all students appears to undermine and shortchange African American learners (Lewis et al., in press). This dilemma exemplifies how access to educational institutions does not secure the ability to marshal these resources to remedy the legacy of social-structural inequality in American education.

Considering quantity versus quality provides a second lens to explore the causes of African American underperformance and its relation to social-structural inequalities in education. Inquiries into equality of quantity provides an explanation of how educational resources are distributed and whether African American learners are receiving an equitable share of social resources

(R. Thompson & Parker, 2007). Are there enough schools to meet the needs of families in urban communities? Are there enough books and lab supplies? Is there a shortfall in teachers in urban classrooms?

R. Thompson and Parker (2007) noted that even after increasing funding figures for low-income urban students by 40%, a funding gap still exists between these schools and higher income districts (p. 30). Education Trust–West (2005) found a gap of an average \$472,152 per year between high- and low-minority high schools in California. This translates to a mean difference of \$573 per student in California, and, in New York and Illinois, the differential between high- and low-minority high schools was \$2,615 and \$2,465 per student, respectively. The quantity of resources dedicated to African American urban education is paramount to closing the achievement gap; in fact, eliminating this structural flaw could decrease the achievement gap within urban districts by 24% to 40% (Condrón & Roscigno, 2003).

The amount of resources dedicated to African American urban educational settings is a key component in closing the achievement gap, yet the quality of present resources also has to be considered. Are educational facilities in urban communities technologically equipped to prepare students for life in our techno-centric economy? How does the rapid attrition of teachers affect the quality of education in urban schools? Yet teacher quality is a more fundamental question that exposes a dreaded social–structural dilemma that must be remedied if the achievement gap is to be remedied.

Although NCLB mandates that every child will have access to a high-quality teacher, this is not reality for many African American students, particularly those in urban schools (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; G. L. Thompson, 2004). In reality, 8 out of 10 new teachers are assigned to high-minority schools, where 60% of core courses are taught by teachers lacking the qualifications to do so (Education Trust–West, 2006; Sunderman, 2006). Also, Jerald (2002) concluded that 70% of math courses in high-minority schools were taught by educators lacking a college major or minor in math. These social–structural shortcomings could very well explain why only 12% of African American fourth-graders and 8% of eighth-graders were proficient in math on national standardized tests in 2005 (NAEP, 2006). This social–structural argument should not be viewed as an attack against urban educators. Rather, this contention is a harsh critique against systemic policies and practices that match students who have the greatest academic needs with teachers lacking sufficient training to meet their needs. This teacher-quality failure is only exacerbated by a system and teachers who view the student's culture as pathological and insufficient.

## The Deficit Paradigm

The deficit paradigm lies in stark contrast to the social-structural paradigm in that the latter defers academic shortcomings and failures on society, whereas the former seeks to blame the cultures of African American families and students as diseased and deleterious of worth. The common features of the social-structural and deficit paradigms are set forth a philosophical discussion on society and achievement, yet the paradigms place blame for African American student failure in different camps. A comprehensive understanding of the deficit paradigm can be obtained by exploring its historical and philosophical underpinnings (Valencia, 1997). Hilliard (2002) proclaimed that "racism is real; race is not," yet scientists have used pseudo-research about race and unproven racial differences to create, justify, and sustain oppression and social domination (Aguirre & Turner, 2004; Feagin & Feagin, 2003; Gould, 1996). McKee (1993) cited the work of Ellwood (1901), which captures the essence of philosophies justifying racial domination. Ellwood believed that the behavioral tendencies (habits) of "the negro child, even if reared in a white family under the most favorable conditions, fails to take on the mental and moral characteristics of the Caucasian race . . . the race habits of a thousand generations or more is not lightly set aside by the voluntary or enforced imitation of visible models" (p. 62). Stated differently, the African American race possesses a pattern of behavior later called "racial temperament" that is virtually fixed, innate, and nonresponsive to environmental forces and educational interventions.

McKee (1993) noted that "racial temperament" was presumed to explain differences in ambition, courage, extroversion, cheerfulness, cool-headedness, passion, honesty, submissiveness (p. 92). More important, "this science and philosophy progressed from temperament to intelligence with the arrival of Terman's 1916 IQ test, and its use to test the intelligence of 1,700,000 American soldiers entering World War I" (p. 69). A U.S. Army committee chaired by Robert Yerkes administered Terman's IQ test and concluded that the results represented the "distribution of intelligence in the American population" (p. 69). The final report was problematic for the future of African American education for the following reasons: (a) The researchers claimed that the results proved that the "Negro" was intellectually inferior; (b) racial intellectual differences were asserted to be heritable and innate; and (c) because intelligence was inheritable, education alone was not seen as a source for racial equality (McKee, 1993).

Furthermore, McKee (1993) noted that the work of Edward Byron Reuter revived notions of African American cultural inferiority. As one of America's

leading first-generation sociologists and later the 23rd president of the American Sociological Association, he claimed that African slaves arrived in America with a primitive culture and a demonic religion and were “culturally retarded” after emancipation from slavery (p. 114). Within this context, Hernstein and Murray’s (1994) assertions that African Americans were intellectually inferior to Whites, and are members of a pathological culture are not new at all; rather, they are an expression of a larger social–historical thought in America.

It is this long-standing and invisible paradigm, imposed on the American education system, that gave rise to what researchers refer to as “deficit thinking.” This ideology of African American and other ethnic-minority students’ intellectual and cultural inferiority infects teachers, curriculum development, administrators, school policies, and ultimately, students’ academic progress (Ford, 1996; Gay, 2000; Milner, 2006; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

Anyon (1997) commented that often teachers in urban environments, from marginalized communities themselves, often reinforce this deficit thinking onto their students and have low expectations, give low-level assignments, and speak in ways that are demeaning and demoralizing. Feagin (2006) reminded us that these types of deficit practices are indicative of a racist frame that promotes African American inferiority and maintains White supremacy; all teachers, White and non-White, come to accept and espouse a racist frame—no race or ethnic group in America is exempt or immune from assuming this pervasive ideology.

Ford (1996) added that a byproduct of the deficit paradigm in education is “blaming the victim” (African American students, families, and communities) for underperformance. Indeed, this paradigm views African American educational failure as a direct result of pathologies within Black families, communities, and cultures (Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The deficit paradigm creates, justifies, and maintains unequal education experiences for African American learners by blaming students, not schools or the society, for the Black–White achievement gap. The deficit paradigm becomes problematic in schools when school agents and students come from different cultures and have difficulty relating to each other.

## **The Discontinuity Paradigm**

The final ideological model for the Black–White achievement gap is the discontinuity paradigm, which places the primary responsibility, not necessarily blame, for achievement and failure on members of the schooling

system (i.e., teachers, counselors, and administrators). It is within the vestiges of this paradigm that African American students' successes of failure become actualized. McKinney, Fuller, Hancock, and Audette (2006) contended that teachers are the most vital component in "a child's education, and he or she plays a significant role in children's intellectual, social and emotional development" (p. 80). At the center of every classroom stands a teacher who determines, on a fundamental level, the climate of learning in the classroom. Coupled with the influence and intersection of school policies and community demographics, teachers construct classrooms based on their experiences, perceptions, and beliefs (Milner, 2006). Consequently, a teacher's level of cultural competence and ability to teach culturally responsively will create a climate of academic success or failure for all students, particularly African American students in urban educational settings (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Talbert-Johnson, 2006). Educators' lack of cultural competence and pedagogical responsiveness to meet the need of African American students is the subject of discontinuity paradigms. Furthermore, these two factors are viewed as key detractors from the academic advancement of African Americans (Diamond et. al, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McKinney et. al, 2006; Milner, 2006; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). The Black-White achievement gap framed from a discontinuity paradigm perspective views agents within the schooling system as the key stumbling block for many African American learners in urban schools.

Although the achievement gap is primarily measured according to test scores (Anderson, 2007), teaching and learning proves to be a much more complicated and dynamic endeavor. For many African American students, learning is best facilitated when pedagogy and content are culturally relevant to their identity development incorporate communal/relationship centered values and interactions (Hale, 1986; Nieto, 1996; Shujaa, 1994). Yet in many traditional classrooms, teaching and learning is a teacher-centered, individualistic, culturally irrelevant, and extrinsically motivated process, creating discontinuities that undermine teaching and learning (Gay, 2000).

Cultural discontinuity theories attempt to frame these cultural clashes between the African American students' sociocultural realities and the mainstream values of American schooling. Au (2006) noted that many African American students are alienated and marginalized in urban educational settings throughout the United States as a result of cultural clashes and discontinuities with curriculum, teacher-student interactions, and other differences between their home culture and school culture According to Ladson-Billings (2001),



The clash between school culture and home culture becomes evident in judgments and labels that teachers place on students with non-mainstream speech and styles of discourse and through teacher's use of instructional practices and classroom management strategies that are at odds with community norms. (p. 167)

Viadero (1996) insisted that when educators and students come from different backgrounds, they may not speak the same cultural language.

Likewise, Heath (1983) found that two impoverished Black and White families had different ways of telling stories, rearing children, and reading material. We have long determined that effective educators need to be aware of the rich culture that students bring with them to the classroom and to use it as a pedagogical bridge for academic success (Delpit, 1995; Moll, 1992) that is underscored by principles for teaching to diversity (Hollins, King, & Wayman, 1994; Sharp & Gallimore, 1998). Until urban classroom teachers and other educational professionals address the conditions that give rise to discontinuities between African American students and the American schooling process, the achievement gap will likely be a problem for years to come.

However, patterns of cultural, academic, and social discontinuity in classrooms can be addressed by teachers becoming culturally literate and modeling best practices for teaching in urban settings by employing culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rasool & Curtis, 2000). In addition, research supports the notion that urban educational settings must be staffed with both academically qualified and culturally competent teachers (Haberman, 2005; McKinney et al., 2006; G. L. Thompson, 2004). Solving the urban school-staffing crisis will advance urban education, yet teachers must still become culturally educated or literate.

Cultural literacy theory includes the development of student-teacher relationships through knowledge, compassion, and care (Hancock, 2006). This process of relationship building is key, because African American students seek relationships based on interest, trust and shared experiences with their teachers (Hale, 1986; Nieto, 1996; Shujaa, 1994). Cultural literacy theory also fosters an awareness of other cultures and its impact on classroom dynamics (Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 2002). Teachers who are literate of others' culture are better able to meet the needs of culturally diverse students (Hancock, 2006; Landsman & Lewis, 2006; Marshall, 2002). This process of cultural literacy is particularly important for White teachers in urban settings, who constitute 70% of all urban teachers (NCES, 2003b).

Landsman (2006) and Hill-Jackson (2007) noted that many White educators struggle with issues of culture because they have been taught to see the world through a "single consciousness" that blinds them to their own culture and the unique cultures of others. In support of this notion, Price (2006) contended that White teachers do not believe that they can understand the social, emotional, and academic needs of students who are non-White. Price further asserted that when teachers are literate of their own culture and the culture of those around them, a sense of power is nurtured that enables them to empower and motivate students. It is clear that one of the major challenges facing urban educational settings is transforming a predominately White, urban teaching force into a body of culturally literate practitioners.

Because it is the teacher's responsibility to cultivate understanding that is grounded in a culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2006), cultural literacy is tantamount in preparing teachers to teach in a culturally responsive manner. Becoming a culturally responsive educator begins with cultivating a disposition that supports encouragement, care, respect, intellectual responsiveness, and empowerment for students, which are found to create cultural continuity in classrooms and supports learning (Gay, 2000; Marshall, 2002; Pang, 2004). McLeod and Tanner (2007) also argued that "while many believe that creating a culturally responsive classroom involves only the implementation of strategies or practices, the process of change requires an internal catalyst more than external fixes (p. 104). Haberman (1995) contended that successful educators in impoverished urban educational settings have an educational philosophy and a set of practices related to issues of discipline, interaction with parents, time on task, and homework that are not typically present in teachers who are unsuccessful in urban impoverished schools. For instance, Haberman concluded that unsuccessful teachers stressed numerous rules and regulations when teaching impoverished children at the expense of relationship building and time spent on academic tasks, whereas successful teachers had fewer rules that focused on creating mutual respect and course work that kept students engaged.

Hill-Jackson, Sewell, and Waters (2007) explained that many White teachers come to classrooms with particular dispositions as advocates or resisters for learning about cultural differences. We should keep in mind that becoming a culturally responsive teacher requires a shift in attitude followed by commitment and implementation of responsive teaching strategies. All teachers, but particularly White teachers, who have lived insulated lives (Howard, 1999) struggle with cultural literacy in the classroom. Clearly, there is no one model for becoming a culturally responsive educator. But Landsman (2006), in reviewing the work of White (1999), offered the following suggestions for teachers who seek renewed attitudes:

1. Intellectual: *Engage conceptually* by seeking to increase one's knowledge about diverse groups.
2. Relational: *Engage in dialogue* by creating ongoing relationships with diverse individuals and becoming involved in community activities.
3. Interactional: *Engage in behavioral interaction* by placing yourself as a White teacher in environments where you become the minority. This will help White teachers understand that they have a culture and it impacts patterns of interaction.
4. Social: *Engage in ongoing activism* by acting as a voice and advocate for your students and their diverse needs among peer educators and the community.

This intellectual, relational, interactional, and social process is highly fluid and ongoing, but if a teacher commits to it, she or he will be better prepared to implement culturally responsive pedagogy in their classrooms (Haberman, 1995; Marshall, 2002; McLeod & Tanner, 2007). Culturally literate and responsive pedagogies are intellectual and affective acts that equip teachers who are poised to effectively educate students of color. Furthermore, culturally literate and responsive teachers are also able to deconstruct the discontinuities between African American learners in urban settings and the American system of schooling.

The discontinuity paradigm seeks to counter deficit orientations by dispelling notions of African American intellectual and cultural inferiority. In addition, discontinuity theorists view deficit ideologies at work in the hearts and minds of teachers, counselors, and administrators as the source of African American underperformance. Furthermore, these theories assert that culturally literate and responsive educators are the key element in transforming the academic achievement for African American students in urban educational settings.

Collectively, the social-structural, deficit, and discontinuity paradigms provide a framework for understanding Bell's (1992) racial reality theory: the philosophy, political, and practical implications on the American school system add credence that racism is an intractable feature of our educational system. A search for viable solutions to redress African American student underperformance must address these factors with specific applications for stakeholders in urban settings.

## **Recommendations for Urban Stakeholders**

The responsibility for eliminating this achievement gap, produced from the standardized testing craze that has overtaken public education, has fallen

to current generations of urban educators, including (a) administrators, (b) parents and African American students in urban settings, and (c) school agents. Widespread improvements in the academic performance of African American students in K-12 urban educational settings depends in large part on educators eliminating philosophies and practices that are antithetical to academic excellence. As a result, new recommendations are needed to reverse the lack of cultural literacy (Landsman, 2006; Milner, 2006), high concentrations of deficit thinking (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001), and low levels of competence in culturally responsive teaching strategies currently practiced every day in urban educational settings (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The following recommendations are made to administrators, families, communities, and school agents in urban educational settings.

## **Recommendations for Society and School Systems**

District and school administrators in urban settings must articulate, disseminate, and maintain a philosophy of excellence specifically designed to promote academic achievement among African American learners. This is much more than a hollow statement but a deliberate effort on the part of administrators to guide, encourage, and support the efforts of educators in setting high expectations and providing high-quality instruction to African Americans students.

Administrators must use this governing philosophy to align district policies, school policies, mission statements, and teacher practices. For instance, efforts should be made to increase their instructional leadership of the urban educational setting. Often, school administrators devote the majority of their time to discipline and other noninstructional duties, which usually means instructional leadership is shortchanged.

Efforts should be made to provide current teachers with state-of-the-art professional development opportunities. This will equip teachers in this setting with the most effective teaching strategies to increase the academic achievement levels of their African American students.

Systemic accountability is also necessary to create accountability for high standards, professional development, and the highest-quality teaching based on best practices. This should take the form of more comprehensive teacher-induction programs and classroom observations.

Equity audits should be a regular function of school districts. Reviews of district accountability systems, curricula, teacher quality, and so forth (with an appraisal of the influence of civil rights) must be an ongoing discussion for understanding and changing the achievement gap.

## **Recommendations for Families and Communities**

Every attempt should be made with school officials to fund after-school programs to allow African American students more time to obtain the necessary skills in the academic environment. Also, families and communities must make a concerted effort to make sure the African American student attends the after-school programs faithfully to improve their academic skills.

African American families and communities must become more involved in Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) activities at the school. More concerted effort to attend by parents and community members will let educational professionals understand that all constituents (educators, parents, and community) are working together in the best interest of the child.

Community organizations (i.e., urban leagues, NAACP) should begin focused community efforts to bring education to the forefront of their agendas to work with schools in the urban educational settings to raise the academic levels of African American students.

## **Recommendations for School Agents**

Every attempt should be made to provide “relevant” professional development opportunities for urban educators that can be immediately implemented in the school site or classroom. More specifically, these professional-development training sessions should be focused on teacher-leader programs, renewed induction programs, and classroom practices.

Collaborative relationships with parents and family should be sought with renewed energy. Traditional and passive approaches to parental involvement must be put aside in favor of models informed by best practices. For example, instead of parents coming to the school site, perhaps the teachers need to visit the home.

Teachers must set high academic, social, and behavioral expectations for African American students in the context of an authentically supportive classroom environment.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the proliferation of research and literature investigating the Black-White achievement gap, it has not produced the kinds of positive effects that we all have long imagined for the African American learner. The authors adopt Bell's (1992) racism reality theory and Feagin's (2006) work documenting that covert racism is still a part of the American system and has

affected every aspect of the field of education. First, we shared national achievement test scores from NCES, NAEP, and TUDA data that verify what an already littered field on the achievement gap asserts—that African American students are falling far below the national average and their White counterparts. These abbreviated equity audits indicate the systemic short-changing of African American students in urban educational settings 6 years after the implementation of NCLB. Despite the various promises of NCLB, the Black–White achievement gap persists. Nearly 9 out of 10 African American students attending urban schools in the 11 urban districts in the National Assessment of Educational Progress database on urban school districts are not meeting proficiency rates in reading and math. It is not possible to imagine a situation more bleak and disparate than the educational crisis in urban America. The achievement differences are so significant and pervasive that scholars have surmised that systemic forces, such as racism, must be at work in urban spaces, which have become the insidious manifestations of a racist society.

Second, we contend that the MAP reveals a web of interrelated impediments that are actively and passively undermining widespread academic excellence among African Americans attending urban schools. Race- and class-based inequalities create and perpetuate the unequal distribution of educational resources, which sustains the Black–White achievement gap. The MAP outlines a host of ideologies, policies, and practices that contribute to the crisis in urban education. Yet not one factor can sufficiently explain the persistence of the Black–White achievement gap that clearly exists across academic disciplines—specifically in the areas of math and reading. We reluctantly concede that in its current condition, American education is ill-equipped to meet the needs of African American learners, particularly those in urban educational settings.

In the social–structural paradigm, African American student underperformance is seen as an outgrowth of a racialized society. The African American community and students have access to education but no control; inadequate school funding and the lack of quality teachers are seen as the primary cause for school failure. Alternatively, in the deficit paradigm, blame for underperformance is shifted to the African American students and families, who are deemed as pathological or culturally deficient. Supporters of this philosophy propose that African Americans continue to fail academically because of innate qualities that are beyond the control of teachers and schools. This type of rationalization is quite dangerous and insidious because it comes from a society built on separatism and supremacy. The deficit paradigm is most sinister because its roots were formed within a racist society and it has evolved

over the years from overt practices to covert educational habits. The discontinuity paradigm is an ideological reminder that school agents need to be aware and literate of the cultural backgrounds of their students; often there is a cultural mismatch between African American urban learners and educators. The discontinuity paradigm encourages teachers to become culturally literate and to seek culturally responsive pedagogy that ensures success for African American learners.

Finally, given the stagnation of the African American achievement crisis, stakeholders will have to work with school policies, school agents, and African American students' families and communities. This article offers a plethora of suggestions for moving forward to redirect African American student failure to a new era of success.

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